Chasing Horses
a story by Brooks Kohler

The farmhouse stood as abandoned rumor of a dream nested in the southwest corner of Texas between Mexico and the Nueces River. Maps refer to it as the Rio Grand Plain. Locals call it the Shrublands. John thought of it as a personal prison.

Day and night his horses begged for rain. They pranced up orange dust while taking fast jab charges at the wooden fence only to find they lacked the courage to kick it. From his bedroom window, John's sweaty eye peered out at the hot bloods, wondering when one might realize the fence is nothing more than blackjack boards held together by rusting nails. It was as if their heartbeats resonated across the dry powdered soil, wailing on him to break his malignant silence.

When he had enough, John rolled over onto his back and gazed up at the flies on the plaster ceiling. The flies crawled to a brown spot where the plaster dripped water in heavy rains. The buzzing pests unbuckled from the ceiling to change positions and fight each other for a place next to the brown spot. Their movements alone caused their

jealousy for the stench of misery to soothe their appetite. Regardless of the time, whether it be bone aching night or painful mid-day heat, the flies gathered to him as he festered on a rancid mattress made damp by the liquor sweats.

At the base of the bed, his grimy gingers fumbled for the neck of a near empty bottle of Ten High. He kept one red eye on the flies and the other on a wall where a thin piece of yellowed string managed to hold a shattered frame with the image of a dark haired, fair skinned female who never aged past twenty. Roslyn moved out in May. Her image could not escape the frame nor her beauty in John's mind. He hoped one day to see the miracle of a trailing dust plume as a speeding car bounced over a small hill a mile or so off to the south near a wrecked windmill no longer milling, but hope is a tricky thing to grasp, whereas, a whiskey bottle is easy.

John leaned to his side and lifted the bottle up as if it might be the last thing he did for the remainder of the day if not his life. Accomplished

to do so much, he laid his head against his smelly pillow and placed the bottle on his chest. With his eye on the frame, he slowly began to twist off the cap until it finally slipped from the threads and dropped onto the mattress to hide among the sheet folds.

A gust of hot wind flicked the flimsy curtain obscuring the window. It flagged in, and for a flashing moment, let in sunlight too. A brilliant, waving glow from a million miles away moved along the wall and walked the hardwood floor to settle on the bed and slide down the amber neck of Ten High.

His mind made up, John tipped the bottle to his sticky lips. He moaned for a bit as the last swallows of gut wrenching pain gripped tightly to his innards. His stomach churned the emptiness, quelled by no more than a few slices of greasy summer sausage. Fighting the urge not to let it all go, he held himself tightly to keep from hemorrhaging.

Shivers and shakes trembled up and down his

length in feverish shocks. The flies on the ceiling whirled about in a frantic dance of impatient joy, watching him grit his teeth to hold back the forceful coming. The flag flapping wind burst through once more to escape out the bedroom and rush to the living room. It bolted toward the screen door leading to the front porch and pushed out in a violent overthrow, causing the door to open wide for a second, or two, or three, then recoil back – *Slap*!

The sound of splintered wood against ageing trim caused John to rise up straight to a silent crescendo. It began immediately to engulf him in a demonic, wide-eyed stance he would never come to figure for good. Clinching his fist, he pounded the mattress so terribly harsh the horses began to join in with hoof stamping. Snorting and pounding, the tantrum continued on and on and on and without knowing, John began to slowly lean to his right. Second by passing second he leaned farther to the right and more pronounced by the dwindling moments of time. He angled so far he never

noticed he slipped off the mattress, until the painful slap of the floor below smacked his clammy cheek.

Bloody faced, John pushed opened the screen door. In his head, he heard the sound of trumpets. Beneath a dingy white V-neck t-shirt he felt the beating of an alcoholic's conscience, and above a rusting tin roof was a blue southern sky stretched out to the nothing. From the shadow of the porch, he viewed the world as if through a big ole window. Bold, fluffy, cotton clouds scooted along something unseen. Piney wood and needle grass whiskered the beige fading land. Not but a short walk from the saving grace of the shade were the galloping horses. Seeing him, they reared up high, clawed at the air, and jostled their necks wildly, like drill bits too dull to start a hole. He spied them with irritable purpose.

His boots began to move, walking him close to the edge of the bright light of day. Each step caused the dusty Texas porch planks to creak and crackle. Everything in all directions appeared

brown and dry, as if God spat coffee while laughing at his folly.

Stopping at the edge of the porch where his face remained partially shielded from the sun, he lit a cigarette to watch the horses dance. Up and down, spinning like oil rigs, they churned up the fine grain powder dust until it lay so thick in the arid heat the corral nearly vanished out of sight.

“Go on and kick out!” shouted John. The horses spun and churned. “It’s just old blackjack!” They raised and danced, bouncing, whirling, and challenging him. “It’s not even a fence really!” He rolled his tongue across a chipped tooth, and the horses began to race laps in a circle before slowly, methodically, easing into a line of questioning. “Can you smell my old rotten tooth?” asked John, stepping down off the porch. “I’d like to get it fixed,” he said, walking out into sting light so bright it caused him to drop to his knees. The horses stirred but remained steadfast.

“I’m alright,” he whispered. “Tired, but alright.”

Hobbled, John placed his left hand on the warm southern Earth and covered his eyes with his right as he pushed himself up. Gaining his footing, he spread his legs out wide so as to firm his condition and allow his eyes to adjust to the burning.

“I been inside too long,” he said. “I can’t see too good. Like you, I’ve suffered, but unlike you, I know a fake prison when I see one!”

John lunged at the gate with a violent hate. The horses jerked back and writhed at his anger.

“Go on! Get outta here!” he ordered, unlatching the gate. “It’s just old stupid blackjack boards I found in a ditch! Get outta here!” He thrust the gate open wide to the point it splintered and snapped off the hinges. Like his spirit, it collapsed on the ground with only the powder dust for an epitaph. “See! It’s so flimsy it breaks under its own weight.” The horses backed away from him, and for a moment, he thought they might charge, but then he realized they were merely tightening their line to wait him out. “The gate’s open,” he said. “You’re free

to go and do whatever horses do in the wild. Me? I'm sick, and I'm going to go sit down in that chair over there and try to get un-sick."

He turned to walk away, but as he did, the biggest one, a tall gray hot blood holding its temper, moved from the line to exit the gate. John sensed the beast behind him, and whereas, before, he had not considered it a beast. In the time between his going to and leaving the corral, it had become a beast. Without turning to see its flaring nostrils, he said in a low, drunkard-growling tone, "If you're gonna end me, you better do it, or so help me, I'll lay you out with a carbine."

The horse launched up high to the sky. Frightened, John shuttered and spun around to see the shapes of the hooves working as a tiller, slicing and dicing through the air. He tried to move, to hide from the monster, but cowering did no good. It wailed at him as a scorned banshee, until finally the muscled mass crashed down hard on John's neck to cause the sound of a bone snapping crack. John fell over without even a battle to save his

bloody face from slapping the ground. The horse, satisfied, turned to the others. His body left for dead in the Texas dust and heat, John lay limp as the sun baked him.

THE END

"Chasing Horses" (Written in 2020. Published by Brooks Kohler in 2021.)

This story is fiction. Similarities to any person living or deceased are coincidence.